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ABSTRACT

Process-based approaches to the instruction of writing in English as a second language (ESL), designed to recognize composition as a complex, nonlinear, creative process, must not be so loosely structured that the college-bound ESL student gets lost in the method. A relatively structured process approach, developed for advanced-level students who need to write college-level expository essays and compositions, presents composing and idea generation as a complex, systematic whole. The method uses a series of eight writing stages, each of which has two constantly interacting facets, thinking and writing. Also, each stage interacts within itself and with the other stages in any order, any number of times. The system gives both direction and freedom to the student and, while it uses elements common in composition instruction and materials, it is unusual in its integration of a large number of elements into a whole along with great flexibility of application. (Author/MSE)

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A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO TEACHING COMPOSITION

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Many of the methods commonly used to teach composition to advanced ESL students fail to give adequate recognition to the complexity, creativity, and nonlinearity of the composing process, particularly to the ways idea generation occurs throughout, not just near the beginning of the process. As a result of concern over this failure, various kinds of process-based teaching approaches are now being explored. However, to be practical in the usual situation where the university-bound student has very little time to learn how to write academic papers, a process-based approach must not be so loosely structured that the student becomes lost in the "method." This article outlines a relatively structured process approach which seeks to present composing as a complex, systematic whole by using a series of stages, each of which interacts within itself and with the other stages in any order any number of times. The construct thus gives both freedom and direction to the student in learning.

The approach to teaching composition to be outlined in this article is intended for advanced level students who need to learn to write the kinds of expository essays and compositions that are required in the U.S. university. The approach regards composing as a complex organic whole and utilizes as a teaching device a series of stages, each of which is seen as having two constantly interacting faces--thinking and writing; the stages are additive and operate recursively rather than sequentially.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

This formulation addresses several theoretical, methodological, and practical considerations in one dynamic construct. First, research on what the composing process is like, for both first language and second language writers, has confirmed what proficient writers and composition teachers have probably known all along--that composing is a very complex, nonlinear, recursive process involving false moves, backtracking, expansions, and invention, and that the generation of ideas and the generation of text interact throughout the process (Watson 1982, Zamel 1983, Spack 1984). Yet textbooks may give the impression that composing is a fairly straightforward, linear process. Students may conclude that they should be able to sit down and write complete papers from first page to last page, everytime, after some initial planning. When they find that they cannot do so, they think they are abnormal. They are not, of course, and the approach to be presented here is designed to give the student some sense of that fact.

Second, there is the troublesome question of how to introduce the student to the use of the conventions which operate in the presenting of ideas in academic writing. That there is a need for the student to learn to handle the conventions of textbuilding is evident to anyone who has

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ever read the first academic-style compositions written by advanced ESL students. It appears that the foreign student has not yet developed the sorts of "intuition" (Irmscher 1979:33) possessed by the skilled writer about the interaction of ideas with the conventions for their presentation in textual form. Although this situation is no doubt primarily due to a lack of exposure to and experience in writing American academic prose, there is the further complication that the conventions for text building are, to some extent, culturally established and hence to varying degrees culture specific (Kaplan 1983). Thus, it may not be that the foreign student has no intuitions about the conventions for expressing meaning in text, but rather that the intuitions are inappropriate for the setting represented by the U.S. university. In that setting, of course, our students' papers must meet the academic reader's expectations by fulfilling certain conventions of content, logic, organization and development, expression, and form to a reasonable degree. Jotting down ideas on paper does not constitute American academic prose; there are constraints imposed by the expectation on the part of the reader as to how the ideas will be presented and explored. If the expectation is not fulfilled, communication will be weakened: the history teacher will not be able to follow the ideas.

Unfortunately, however, many of the methods used to teach composition seem not to work very well in helping the student internalize the conventions of text creation. Static descriptions of what a composition is like, or models for imitation, usually fail to engage the student in an active composing process in any systematic way, so that there is often little real mastery of the conventions that were supposed to have been practiced.

In addressing this need for ESL students to learn to handle conventions of text building, the construct used in my approach attempts to get the student to see that conventions arise out of the need for communication and that, as such, they are linked to discovery and thinking: they are not independent entities existing in a vacuum but enter into the complexities of composing which were noted earlier.

Finally, there is the methodological and motivational consideration that for an approach to work the student must be able to feel that it works. Typically, that amounts to saying that the student needs to feel that it both provides a sense of direction and offers some degree of freedom. Too much of either usually leads to student frustration. In my teaching approach, the stages and their parts provide points of reference so that the student never feels lost; at the same time, certain intentional omissions in the internal formulation of the stages and the almost infinite variety in the ways the student can utilize them recursively allows for individual variability.

THE NATURE OF THE APPROACH

My approach, then, centers around a series of eight procedural stages--basically an heuristic or teaching device, which addresses two main concerns: the need for the student to engage in composing as a complex, nonlinear discovery or problem solving process where thought interacts with expression at every stage; and the need for the student to learn in some systematic way, as part of the composing process itself, what the parameters of the conventions for text building are in the U.S. academic setting. The eight stages are each composed of two facets--a Thinking portion and a Writing portion, which constantly interact with one another; the stages are additive and interact with one another recursively. The total construct can be represented in the following rough schematic form, in which all lines are to be read as bidirectional arrows.

Stage	Thinking	Writing
1	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Write a thesis sentence
2	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Write a set of topic sentences
3	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Write supporting sentences
4	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Add to the supporting sentences to improve them
5	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Add links between paragraphs
6	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Add links within paragraphs, if necessary re-ordering elements
7	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Write an opener for the paper
8	Think (a)for invention, (b)for communication	Write a closing paragraph

The Thinking facet of each stage is intended to direct the student toward discovering, generating, or creating meaning. To this end, the full versions of the Thinking facets, to be presented in the next section, are formulated as questions--questions of two types. The first questions simply attempt to get the student started thinking. The second type asks the writer to think further, to go beyond personal meaning to discover how to make that meaning accessible to a reader.

The Writing facet of each stage asks for written expression of the inventions coming out of the Thinking activities, asks the student to write segments of the actual paper. Each is formulated as an explicit direction for what the student must write.

The Thinking and the Writing facets are inextricably linked in this model. They interact repeatedly so that a think-write-rethink-rewrite sequence emerges, and sometimes they no doubt operate simultaneously. In fact, the writing conventions represented by the Writing directions are seen as arising from the thinking that a writer must do in order to discover how to make meaning accessible to a reader, which is the second kind of thinking included in each Thinking facet. It is important to note that the very precise, almost prescriptive formulation of the Writing directions helps to make the link between Writing and Thinking dynamic. That is, upon realizing that some element asked for in a Writing direction is missing or inaccurate, the student thinks again, usually ending up considering how to make meaning clearer to the reader.

The eight stages are additive. By working through them all, the student will end up with a composition.

Finally, the stages interact with one another, any number of times, and in any order, not necessarily sequentially. About all that can be said

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about the sequencing of the eight stages is that in general the first three precede the last five in the actual process of composing.

Overall, the construct gives the freedom to rethink and to revise constantly--the freedom to change direction. Yet it also provides clearcut and demanding points of reference throughout. The process in application is a dynamic one, since it is both systematic and flexible.

THE EIGHT STAGES

The sketch which follows provides some feeling for what each of the stages is like, offers an indication of the sorts of activities that the student and teacher can engage in for each, and points out the most likely ways that the stages will interact recursively.

First Stage, Thinking:

(a) What topic do I care about? What is the main idea or feeling I have about this topic? What is the important thing to me about it? What do I want to say, really?

(b) How can I make the point I want to make for my reader?

First Stage, Writing:

Write down this main idea as a thesis sentence. That is, write a declarative sentence that makes a single, clear, direct, restricted statement that both requires proof, illustration, or explanation and is capable of being proved, illustrated or explained. This sentence will be part of the actual composition, usually appearing near the beginning.

The function of the first stage overall is to encourage discovery of a main idea and to ask that it be examined and then stated for a reader. For the Thinking portion, many of what are commonly called pre-writing techniques for generating topics and ideas and for narrowing them down can be explored and experimented with--e.g. brainstorming, listing, class discussions, talking it out with a peer, free writing, and heuristics such as question sets. Some students may even produce as early as this what Flower has called "Writer-Based prose," writing that is essentially addressed inward, to the writer, and which does not attempt exchange with a reader (1981). Practicing several of these techniques in class is useful and probably necessary, since different writers may use quite different thinking techniques, and even the same writer may want to use different strategies at different times, depending on the writing task.

For the Writing portion, the use of sample student responses can be very effectively used, particularly if care is taken to link the discussion back to the Thinking questions. Students can examine items such as (1)-(10) and paired items such as (11) and (12) and can discover what it is about each that violates the convention represented by the Writing direction, and, more important, why that in turn causes a recycling back to the Thinking portion. That is, by violating the elements of the Thinking direction in the ways indicated in brackets, the writer has failed either to discover for himself what the main idea is or has failed to take into account the reader's need to be able to comprehend what is meant. For example, in item (7), the student still has to think to decide what it is about "education" that is of importance to him, whereas in (5) the writer will have to think to discover how to let the reader know what "amazing" really means here.

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1. The absent-mindedness of Professor Smith. [not a sentence]
2. How absent-minded Professor Smith was! [not declarative]
3. Why was Professor Smith so absent-minded? [not a statement]
4. Professor Smith was handsome and absent-minded. [not single]
5. Professor Smith was amazing. [not clear]
6. This paper will discuss Professor Smith's casual behavior. [not direct]
7. Education in the U.S. offers many opportunities. [not restricted]
8. Professor Smith was often late to class. [does not require proof; factual]
9. Professor Smith was the most absent-minded teacher ever to teach at Georgetown. [not capable of reasonable proof; too absolute]
10. Professor Smith's casual behavior irritated many students.
11. The structure of DNA
    Working at McDonald's last summer
    [not statements/sentences]

    DNA has a double helix structure.
    Working at McDonald's last summer taught me self-discipline.
12. My roommate is unique.
    Biology is interesting.
    [not clear]

    My roommate is disorganized.
    Biology reveals the mysteries of the living cell.

In contrast, items like (10), those in the second half of (11) and (12), and (13) do measure up moderately well, something which the students readily discover by working through the first stage.

13. Agrarian society constituted a major change from earlier horticultural societies.
    All neurotic disorders have anxiety as a central characteristic.
    Chemical-physical factors in the body control ventilation.

* * * *

Second Stage, Thinking:

(a) What are the main reasons I think my central idea is true? Why do I think it is important? What are the main points about it that make it engaging for me? What makes it worth talking about?

(b) How can I show that my main idea is true or important to my reader? What are the main things I can tell him?

Second Stage, Writing:

Write down your answers to these considerations in a series of a few sentences. That is, write at least three or four sentences about the thesis you have come up with, clearly and directly about the whole of it, its whole claim, not just about a topic in it. Each should help show that the point you made in your thesis is a reasonable claim in one important way. You will usually use each of the sentences you write as a topic sentence to open each paragraph or major section in your paper.

Check that the three sentences each makes a significant point, that they are about equal in importance, and that they are parallel in their approach to the thesis--i.e. that they do not overlap one another. This means that often they will all answer the same question--e.g. why? with what results? where when? under what conditions? who? for whom? how? to what extent? etc.

The function of the second stage is to encourage the discovery of structure underlying the thesis and to ask for a written statement of it. For the Thinking portion, many of the pre-writing techniques mentioned earlier are helpful, particularly the use of questions to get the student thinking. The teacher preferably should <u>not</u> present pre-formed organizational patterns, but should let the students generate their own structure.

For the Writing portion, student generated responses can be examined to see if the convention represented by the Writing direction has been addressed. Thus, set (14) is acceptable, but (15) is not (the categories overlap.) And neither is (16), for its last topic sentence pertains only to a topic, Sesame Street, in the thesis and not to the claim that children learn something from it--an error which accounts for many a paper that seems to wander aimlessly.

14. Thesis: I feel like I am three different people, I act so differently with different people.
    1. In front of my conservative parents, I am a well-behaved Chinese adolescent, demure and obedient.
    2. With my best friend I am a wild and crazy person, who can stand up and defend herself.
    3. With Americans I do not know well, I am a reserved, almost unfriendly person.

15. Thesis: Smoking can be dangerous to the smoker's health.
    1. Smoking may aggravate tuberculosis.
    2. Smoking may cause cancer.
    3. Smoking may cause lung disorders.

16. Thesis: "Sesame Street" increases children's general knowledge.
    1. Children learn to differentiate symbolic representations.
    2. They start learning about the social environment.
    3. Children are taught some basic facts about the physical world.
    4. "Sesame Street" is broadcast on two channels in this area.

Once again, it is important to constantly recycle back into the Thinking questions as such activities are done, to bring out, for instance that item (15) probably means that the writer's thoughts are not yet sorted out. Going back to the first stage is quite likely, as well, if the student discovers that the original thesis no longer reflects the meaning subsumed by his topic sentences.

* * * *

Third Stage, Thinking:
(a) What are some of the things that made me think of my main points (topic sentences)? What do I really mean by each point? What do I feel and see about each topic sentence?
(b) How can I explain to my reader what I mean by each topic sentence? How can I show what I feel? How can I show each one is true?

Third Stage, Writing:
Keeping these thoughts in mind, write down a series of sentences for each of your topic sentences. That is, write at least five or six sentences about each topic sentence--clearly and directly about its basic point. They should explore what you know about the point made in the topic sentence and should show, "prove," illustrate or explain its point to a reader. These sentences will serve as supporting sentences within the paragraphs of your composition. [You will now have the basic structure of a composition, a skeleton paper, but it is not yet complete.]

The function of the third stage is to allow the student to discover within and then to express for a reader significant ideas about each major point. To encourage discovery, pre-writing activities such as lists and talking with a real reader are helpful. For the Writing segment, it is probably advisable to avoid giving any illustrative modes at all, or at

least not until the students have done considerable writing of their own support. The whole point of the third stage is to get the student to generate and express original material, not to imitate.

Recursiveness should also be encouraged at this stage. Clearly, if the sentences generated as paragraph support turn out to be compelling but to have no relation to the points identified in the topic sentences, students can recycle back to the second stage, rethink the major points, and revise the topic sentences.

* * * *

Fourth Stage, Thinking:

(a) Is this all? Have I included all I feel? All that I see? All the reasons I think the topic sentence is true in each case? Or have I left something important out? Have I explored and discovered my claims fully?

(b) How can I make what I have written really reflect what I mean? How can I evoke in the reader the picture that I see myself?

Fourth Stage, Writing:

Keeping your answers to these questions in mind, revise and add to your support. That is, re-do the supporting sentences, adding missing ideas and making the sentences as precise, specific, and concrete as is reasonable for the intended meaning. You can accomplish this by adding examples, anecdotes, statistics, facts, and details; you can also do it by constructing a detailed analysis, explanation, or argument within the paragraph.

You can usually do the fourth writing stage either by substituting a more detailed version for your original supporting sentence or by adding details following your original supporting sentence. You may end up with four or five sentences for every one you had before!

Keep in mind that your purpose is to show your reader that your topic sentence makes a reasonable claim; so make the support for it as clear and vivid for him as it is to you. Ask yourself, "Can the reader really see what I see when I say this, or do I need to give him more information?"

The fourth stage seeks clarification of the student's own thought and a fuller realization that writing for oneself is not necessarily the same as writing for a reader; it also asks the student to do something to the support to achieve a corresponding clarification for the reader. Getting students to realize that what is clear to them is not necessarily clear to the reader is often particularly hard so that techniques such as peer reading and questioning are valuable tools.

As for the Writing portion at the fourth stage, unlike the third stage, considerable work with various of the techniques suggested in the formulation can help, though such work must be structured so that direct imitations cannot occur. For instance, students can readily see that (17a) is not as "real" as (17b), which is a more detailed and specific version which can be substituted for it, and that (18a) is not as compelling as is (18b), which would be added following (18a) to explicate its point. Exercises asking students to write improved versions like the (b) items are helpful.

17a. Our child is usually dirty.

b. Our son John usually has dried food around his mouth and has on a shirt with juice dribbles down the front and pants with grass stains and mud on the knees.

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18a. Bill's clothing is often mismatched.
b. For example, yesterday he wore a pair of ragged green denim jeans with a brand new red silk shirt.

Also helpful is a little work actively constructing a multi-stage argument, explanation, or description, where the arrangement of the elements is what is important, with attention being given to making it comprehensible to a reader.

* * * *

Fifth Stage, Thinking:
(a) What is the logical relation between my main points (i.e. between the points represented by the topic sentences)?
(b) How can I show that relation to the reader?
Fifth Stage, Writing:
Indicate what the relations are by adding to each of your topic sentences a word or phrase which refers to the idea of the body paragraph which precedes. That is, use transitionsor other linking devices in the topic sentences to clearly link your paragraphs to one another.
You may use a short transition or linkage, or a combination of a short transition word or phrase plus a phrase summarizing the content of the preceding paragraph.

This stage brings to the conscious level the fact that the parts of the paper are organically related in some way, and then asks that the relation be expressed for the reader. To help with the Thinking aspect, the teacher may want to elicit from the class a survey of what sorts of logical relations may exist between a pair of ideas, perhaps by using sentence pairs, and the linguistic forms commonly used to express each relation. To get at the Writing aspect, a set or two like (19) can be provided and then the students can go back to their earlier papers to rewrite the topic sentences.

19. Thesis: "Sesame Street" increases children's general knowledge.
1. Children learn to differentiate symbolic representations.
2. Moreover, they start learning about the social enyironment.
3. In addition to learning about the social environment, children are taught some basic facts about the physical environment.

This stage may sometimes cause the student to reconsider the second stage (topic sentences) and sometimes the first stage (the thesis) and to revise their wording so that the logical relations involved are more clearly expressed.

* * * *

Sixth Stage, Thinking:
(a) What are the relations between the parts of my explanation for each major point--i.e. between the sentences within each paragraph?
(b) Have I expressed myself such that the reader will see the relations as well as I do?
Sixth Stage, Writing:
Check each supporting sentence within each paragraph to see that it has a reasonable relation to the one preceding it and that it contains one or more words or expressions which link it to or which refer back to the preceding supporting sentence or sentences. If necessary, re-order the sentences to make their relation to one another more accurate. Add linking devices such as transitions, pronouns, repeated words, word substitutes, etc. Your aim is to make each sentence "flow" into the next one.

This stage asks the student to reexamine the paragraph support for logical sequencing and for clear internal links. In actuality, little usually needs to be done with Thinking because for the most part other stages have already touched on the quality of the support (fourth stage) and on logical relations (fifth stage). However, in its Writing aspect, some students discover for the first time that transitions are only one of many ways that language can link consecutive sentences. For example, in (20), every word in the second sentence refers back to something in the first.

20. We asked Bill to come to the party. However, he refused our invitation.

* * * *

Seventh Stage, Thinking:

(a) How did I get into this subject? Why did it strike me? Is there any particular instance of it that particularly impressed me?

(b) How can I use those points to lead the reader into my main idea?

Seventh Stage, Writing:

Add an opener to your paper, one which includes something arresting enough to make the reader want to read the paper, perhaps because it lets the reader know that it treats an important issue, perhaps because it catches his attention, perhaps because it arouses his interest. To do this, you might use an anecdote, striking facts or statistics, a quotation, a contradiction of some sort, background information to establish significance of the issue--or anything else arresting.

The opener will normally occur with the thesis in the first paragraph of the paper--i.e. in an introduction.

Eighth Stage, Thinking:

(a) Why did I write on this thesis? Why was it important? What have I discovered in the process?

(b) How can I use such considerations to leave my reader with a sense of having read a significant, complete piece?

Eighth Stage, Writing:

Add a closing paragraph to your paper, one which gives the reader the sense that the paper is finished. You can do this by using one or more of the following: a restatement of the thesis, a mention of whatever was included in the opener, a brief summary--or anything else that gives the sense of completion.

These two stages, which can usually be treated together, ask the student to consider why the main point of the paper was significant and then to use that discovery for more effective expression and communication. Rather than giving the students any examples, the ideal is to let the Thinking generate original, arresting openers and closings, as illustrated by the portion of an opener given in (21).

21. Guided somehow by instinct, I finally found my room. My roommate was still awake reading. "Did you go swimming in a brewery?" were the last words I heard that night....

* * * *

To sum up, the result of working through all eight stages, which is accomplished over the course of about seven weeks by introducing and working through a stage at a time and then, beginning with the third stage, requiring a composition reflecting the operation of all the stages covered up to the point of the stage being worked on--i.e. through a series of five or so compositions, will be an organized, focused, developed short composition.

The construct of the eight stages, however, constitutes only part of the course design. The stages, it will have been noticed, did not include editing in the narrow sense of the term. The approach used makes a crucial distinction between revising and editing. Revising is an inherent part of the process represented by the stages. Editing is reserved for quite late in the preparation of each paper, after most of the composing process is complete. Secondly, it is necessary to make clear that the eight stages generate only a basic composition, one with one-level of division in the organizational pattern. However, by the last third or so of the semester, the students quite readily begin to put together two or more such pieces of prose to write longer academic papers. At this stage, the students can be led to see that certain classes of ideas logically consist of two faces which constitute a single reality (e.g. cause and effect; concession; similarity and contrast, etc.) and that such ideas very commonly generate a longer paper consisting of two shorter pieces of prose, two sections, each quite similar to the simple composition generated by the stages. Item (22) presents examples of the sort of thesis that results.

22. Tagore's idea of education, although based on the rediscovery of Indian tradition, also included innovations that were not traditional.

    Reagan's practices of delegating authority and of reading only short, staff-prepared memos resulted in an efficient gubernatorial operation in California.

Besides that sort of expansion, most students by the end of the course have developed enough of a sense of the parameters of acceptability to respond satisfactorily to suggestions that they try to adapt and expand upon the stages a bit. The possession of that sense constitutes the final "stage."

The approach outlined in this article clearly uses certain of the elements that constitute the shared knowledge of composition teachers, elements that we have all seen elsewhere, notably in textbooks in various forms. For example, I am indebted to any number of texts for ideas relating to the use of a step-by-step process approach (Kerrigan 1974, Shoemaker 1985, Winkler and McCuen 1984, Blum, Brinkman, Hoffman, and Peck 1984, Renfro 1985, Ross and Doty 1985). Clearly, the conventions covered by the stages are included in nearly every composition text for this level and often in nearly the same order. What is different about the approach described here is the extent to which it integrates a large number of elements into a whole that allows for great flexibility of application while still remaining systematic.

The success rate is gratifying. By seven to ten weeks into the course, virtually all students are able to write cogent papers--sometimes touching or passionate ones, and sometimes, as might be expected given the kinds of papers typically required in the university, papers showing exploration and skillful integration of academic concepts or ideas.

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THE AUTHOR

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